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Syria and Mesopotamia

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The New Testament book of Acts claims that 'in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians' (Acts 11:26). Paul's letter to the Galatians and further statements from Acts present Antioch as the base from which the first Christians launched their missions out into the larger Mediterranean world. These texts depict Antioch as the place where the tensions of identity associated with Gentile and Jewish converts were first confronted and subsequently argued with the earliest believers still located in Jerusalem. Both Peter and Paul travelled to and from Antioch as they carried out their respective missions, and by virtue of their shared associations with the city granted it singular status for Christians thereafter.[1]

The familiar trajectory of Christian history traces the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem, through Antioch, westward to Rome. But Antioch was also the gateway east. Indeed, if the Abercius inscription from Hieropolis in Phrygia is Christian, it appears to attest to active Christian communities by the late second century as far east as the city of Nisibis on the Roman–Persian border. This chapter will attempt to trace the emergence of Christianity in the region broadly known as Syria: stretching from the coastal ports outside Antioch east to Palmyra and Persia, and from Mesopotamia in the north down to Palestine. While some of our most important early Christian writings survive from this region, material evidence is scarce. We have neither the abundance of inscriptions that survived in Asia Minor, nor the wealth of documentary and literary evidence found in Egypt. What shards of evidence we do have point to a larger cultural milieu in which Semitic, Hellenistic, Roman and Persian traditions and religions interacted with vigour and sophistication.[2]

1 Esp. Gal 2: 1–21; Acts 11: 19–30; 13: 1–3; 14: 21–8; 15: 1–41; 18: 22–3.
2 See above all Millar, *Roman near east*.

The regional context

Although a far older history exists for Syria and Mesopotamia, the region in early Christian times was strongly shaped in Graeco-Roman terms. Its major cities from Antioch or Laodicea to Edessa, Nisibis or Palmyra were almost invariably Hellenistic foundations. Damascus was an exception, but by Roman times the traces of its older past were barely visible. Hellenic civic structures and cultural expressions characterised urban life, and inscriptions were often bilingual in Greek and whatever Semitic dialect was dominant in the area. In the first century, Roman expansion made its presence felt primarily through military presence and significant construction of roads. During the second century, however, Roman rule became a stronger, more integrated aspect of the region. Antioch increasingly functioned as the eastern base for the emperors; with the tetrarchy at the turn of the fourth century, it became the imperial capital of the eastern provinces. Latin words were transmitted through Greek into Semitic languages, and bilingual inscriptions consistently appear in the public and domestic monuments of cities, as well as in documentary archives. In Dura Europos, a trilingual inscription of the third century survives in Latin, Greek and Palmyrene. In cities like Edessa or Palmyra, epigraphic evidence regularly shows Greek and Semitic deities mutually identified with one another – a situation literarily captured in Lucian of Samosata's treatise on the cult of the Syrian goddess at Hierapolis (Mabbug). Ironically, this type of evidence is almost all we know about the indigenous religions during this period: the names of deities, and some material evidence surviving in cult centres or temples. Apart from Lucian's Hellenised account, we know essentially nothing about rituals, myths or devotional practices. At the same time, we have both material and literary evidence to demonstrate, albeit piecemeal, the strength of contemporary Jewish communities throughout the region. Josephus implies (*BJ* 7.44) that the Jewish revolt of 66–73 CE in Palestine provoked anti-Jewish sentiment in Antioch, a situation recurring in the fourth century under Christian leadership.

In the course of the late first and second centuries, the Semitic dialect of Aramaic known as Syriac, prominent in the territory of Edessa ('Urhay' in Syriac), took hold as a primary Christian language of the Syrian region. Virtually every Christian Syriac text prior to the fourth century survives in both Syriac and Greek, and scholars sometimes disagree as to which was the original language. This situation underscores the larger cultural context in which Christianity developed in Syria and Mesopotamia: it was a multilingual region, thriving on international trade and the strategic importance of the

Roman–Persian frontiers, where the exchange of ideas as well as goods was a basic aspect of life. The religious situation is vividly seen in the archaeological remains of the city of Dura Europos on the middle Euphrates river, destroyed in 256 CE during Sassanian Persian incursions. Temples of Greek, Roman, Parthian and Palmyrene deities have been excavated, as well as three small religious buildings formed out of converted private homes in the western part of the city: a Mithraeum, a Jewish synagogue and the earliest surviving Christian church (see Fig. 6, below). The latter two contain brilliant, and extensive, frescoes of biblical narratives. When the Persian army relocated Christian captives into Persian territory during these same battles, there were already established Christian communities to receive them.[3]

Early communities, early literature

Antioch itself served as a kind of anchor connecting Syria to the larger Roman empire; certainly, it played that role administratively for successive Roman emperors. Because of the prominence given to Antioch in the New Testament, because of its relative proximity to Jerusalem, and because of the strength of its Jewish community, scholars have taken Antioch as a primary centre for Christianity's earliest development. Scholars have argued for Antioch as the provenance in which the gospel of Matthew was produced between the years 80 and 90 CE. The most ecclesiastically oriented of the canonical gospels, Matthew gives considerable attention to the problems of church organisation and structure. For similar reasons, many have argued that the *Didache*, perhaps the earliest Christian rule book, produced late in the first century, also came from Antioch or its surrounds. With the letters of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, written early in the second century (probably between 107 and 117) while he was en route to his martyrdom in the city of Rome, a more concrete sense of Antioch as a centre of apostolic, ecclesiastical authority appears.

Ignatius was the earliest proponent of a tripartite ecclesiastical hierarchy.[4] But Ignatius' letters argued further for particular theological themes that would soon become characteristic of Antiochene Christianity. Against docetic or Gnostic ideas that Christ was a divine saviour whose humanity and death had been illusory, and against the Judaising view of Jesus as a pious man perhaps divinely inspired like the prophets of old, Ignatius insisted on Jesus Christ as truly Son and Word of God (Ign. *Eph*. 7; *Magn*. 8–10). Certain that such a

3 Brock, 'Christians in the Sasanid empire'.
4 See pt II, ch. 7, above.

view did not compromise monotheism, Ignatius proclaimed the full integrity of Christ's humanity as well as his divine sonship in terms that laid the foundations for later normative doctrine (*Trall*. 9–10). Travelling across Asia Minor through what he perceived as a bewildering array of Christian communities, practices and teachings, Ignatius argued for uniformity in structure, worship and belief.

Despite its significance as an administrative centre for Roman authorities and as an apparent locus of Christian authority, Antioch flickers in and out of view in these first Christian centuries. After Ignatius, the next significant bishop of the city was Theophilus, a convert from paganism, of whose writings two works mentioned by Eusebius (*HE* 4.24) seem to be lost and one, *Ad Autolycum* ('To Autolycus'), survives. Written around 180, the work is a loosely structured apologetic attack on pagan traditions and defence for Christianity, focused especially on notions of creation, history and moral activity. Strongly influenced by Jewish exegetical patterns as well as Stoic thought, Theophilus yet gives little if any indication of relations between Jews and Christians in the city.

Contemporaneously, but further east, Jewish scholars may well have contributed to the formation of the Syriac Bible. Most of the Peshitta Old Testament was translated between the late first and early third century CE, perhaps with the help of Jewish translators. The oldest version of the Syriac New Testament, and most commonly used well into the fifth century, was the *Diatessaron*. These biblical versions would mark emergent Syrian Christianity in particular ways. Portions of the Peshitta Old Testament show close links to Jewish exegetical traditions of the same period, an intersection that continues to flavour Syrian biblical interpretation in late antiquity. In turn, the *Diatessaron* ascribed to Justin Martyr's pupil Tatian around the year 180 (and, some would claim, produced in Antioch), may have originally been composed in either Greek or Syriac. The Syriac version has some features distinct from the Greek, and proved profoundly influential on the development of piety as well as theological motifs throughout the region of Syria and Mesopotamia.

The *Diatessaron* is often characterised by scholars as 'encratite' or strongly ascetical in flavour, but such a view distorts what we are able to reconstruct of the text. Ephrem Syrus' *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, written in the later fourth century, does not indicate an extremist view incompatible with what becomes mainstream in the post-Nicene era.[5] Rather, the desire to establish certain typological readings linking Old and New Testament passages seems

5 *Ephrem's commentary on the Diatessaron*, McCarthy (trans.)

to lie behind some Syriac word choices, strengthening the eschatological or soteriological force of a given text.[6] For example, John the Baptist's 'vegetarian' diet of milk and honey in the wilderness owes more to images of paradise and redemption than to any sense that the eating of meat (flesh) might in some way be sinful.[7] The importance of such a perspective will become apparent shortly.

Syria preserved the earliest known collection of Christian hymns, the *Odes of Solomon*: forty-two short hymns, surviving nearly complete in Syriac. One hymn survives also in Greek, and five in Coptic.[8] Much about this collection remains a mystery. Proposals on dating range from the late first to the late third century, but the second century seems most likely. The debate over the original language remains unresolved, with Greek, Syriac, Hebrew and Aramaic all having been proposed. While most scholars prefer Syriac, the problem remains that the poetic form of the *Odes* is unlike any other form of Syriac verse we know.[9]

Highly elusive in imagery yet hauntingly beautiful, the *Odes* show strong Johannine themes as well as parallels with the Hodayot literature from Qumran. Baptismal imagery abounds; so, too, motifs of salvific knowledge, Christ as heavenly redeemer, the descent to Sheol, the heavenly ascent of the visionary odist, and the persecution of the faithful. Laced through the sometimes puzzling images are references also to features that mark the more familiar fourth-century literature of what becomes 'normative' Syrian Christianity. For example, in Ode 19, the divine Son of God the Father is born of a virgin mother through the agency of the Holy Spirit – arguably the earliest non-biblical testimony to Mary as virgin mother, and with devotional titles that would characterise western Mariology of a significantly later period. This early appreciation of Mary's significance may lend weight to the possibility that the *Protevangelium of James*, the legendary account of Mary's own birth and upbringing, also a mid-second-century text, may have originated in Syria.[10]

As a group, the *Odes* are notable for their fully active and vividly portrayed Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, at a time when the Spirit is often missing or downplayed in other Christian writings. Powerful feminine imagery is used occasionally in these hymns for Father and Son, but especially for the Holy Spirit, a frequent characteristic of Syriac writings prior to the fifth century

6 Brock, 'What's in a word?'; Murray, *Symbols*, 228–36, 324–9.
7 Brock, 'The Baptist's diet'.
8 *Odes of Solomon*, Charlesworth (ed. and trans.)
9 *Odes of Solomon*, Charlesworth (ed. and trans.); Drijvers, *East of Antioch*.
10 See O. Cullmann's introduction to the *Protevangelium* in *NTApoc*, vol. 1, 421–5; in favour of Syrian provenance, see Smid, *Protevangelium*.

(*ruha*, the Syriac term for 'spirit', is grammatically a feminine noun, although convention led to a change in usage around the year 400 CE).[11]

Especially prominent in these *Odes* are images of healing and bodily wholeness, of belief as a state that brings about health. The body is depicted as an essential agent of devotion to the divine, sanctified and hence made whole by its participation in activities of worship. This imagery of healing and bodily health or wholeness is one of the most pervasive and enduring themes of Syrian Christianity, appearing throughout its regions and across its various doctrinal forms.[12]

The *Chronicle of Edessa* records a flood in Edessa in the year 201 that destroyed 'the temple of the church of the Christians', indicating a community large enough to have had a building of notable importance to the city at the time.[13] Contemporaneously, the career of the great Christian philosopher and teacher Bardaisan (154–222/3 CE) flourished in the city. An aristocrat of eclectic learning – interested in astrology, philosophy, ethnography, history and apparently a fine composer of hymns – Bardaisan enjoyed the favour of the court of king Abgar VIII of Edessa. Though Eusebius (*HE* 4.30) reports that Bardaisan's prolific Syriac writings were translated quickly into Greek by his students and remained in circulation, all that survives is a dialogue on fate, in fact composed by Bardaisan's pupil Philip, known to us as the *Book of the laws of countries*.[14] Eusebius himself attests the excellence of the work, which presents an elegant argument for human free will in the literary form of a philosophical dialogue.

Bardaisan's 'school' continued for some centuries after his death as a contested Christian community in the Edessan area.[15] Eusebius (*HE* 4.30) claims that Bardaisan had been for a time an adherent of Valentinianism, and that, although he later condemned those teachings, the charge of heresy remained. Ephrem was especially contemptuous of Bardaisan's cosmology, but it appears that developments within the later 'school' may have taken Bardaisan's views to greater speculative extremes than he himself intended.

Bardaisan taught a system of thought deeply conversant with a stunning range of traditions.[16] Jewish, Iranian, Chaldaean, Christian and especially Stoic concepts strongly influenced his cosmology, which appears to have been highly original in its formulation. A primary target of Bardaisan's was the teacher Marcion (*c*.140), whose views had spread widely in the eastern territories and

11 Harvey, 'Feminine imagery for the divine'.
12 Murray, *Symbols*, 199–203.
13 *Chronicon Edessenum*, sec. 1.
14 *Book of the laws of countries*, Drijvers (ed. and trans.)
15 Most notably in Ephrem's *Prose refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan*.
16 Drijvers, *Bardaisan*.

remained popular for some centuries. Ephrem, who moved to Edessa in 363, claims the Marcionites were the largest Christian group in Edessa in his time. Against Marcion, Bardaisan argued for one God, a benevolent creator in whose image humanity was made. His view of God encompassed a trinity of Father, Son and Mother of Life (a counterpart to the Holy Spirit similar to the presentation in the *Odes of Solomon*, as well as the *Acts of Thomas*, below), stressing a soteriology of redemptive knowledge made known by Christ. Scholars have noted strong similarities between the cosmologies of Bardaisan and Tatian.

Emerging themes

By the mid-third century, another highly influential Syrian work was circulating widely in Christian communities. The legendary *Acts of Thomas*, originally composed in Syriac but quickly translated into Greek, is an account purporting to tell the adventures of the apostle 'Judas Thomas' as he carried the gospel message east of Antioch, converting communities and kingdoms in Mesopotamia and India.[17] In common with other apocryphal acts of apostles, the *Acts of Thomas* shares literary motifs familiar from the Hellenistic novels. At the same time, the work includes religious and theological materials of great beauty and depth: prayers, hymns, invocations, sacramental celebrations and homilies attend the episodes. At least two of the hymns, the 'Wedding hymn' (chs. 6–7) and the 'Hymn of the pearl' (chs. 108–13), as well as the narrative of Thomas' martyrdom, also circulated independently. Both Greek and Syriac versions show signs of repeated editing, to adjust the story and its adornments to changing doctrinal positions.

In the *Acts of Thomas*, three features of conversion stand out. First, as Thomas teaches it, conversion to the gospel of Jesus Christ requires commitment to an ascetic, specifically celibate, life. Second, conversion, as Thomas effects it, is most often a response to healing from severe illness or demon possession. Jesus is frequently referred to as the Good Physician, and Thomas' prayers and invocations often call for the 'healing of soul and body'. Third, Thomas' work includes extensive ministry to the poor and suffering. The narrative presents these features as creating extreme disruption and social chaos. Hence these *Acts* are strongly based in the narrative motifs and structures of the canonical New Testament, as well as other versions of apocryphal Acts. The continuity is striking because these *Acts* vividly anticipate classic forms of Syrian asceticism that come to characterise the region when ascetic and monastic

17 *Acts of Thomas*, *NTApoc*, vol. II.

movements develop in the late fourth and fifth centuries.[18] The ascetic monk or nun as wandering beggar is a common depiction of the later period, as is the image of the ascetic in constant interaction with domestic and civic communities. In fact, there seems to have been general stress on the values of simplicity or voluntary poverty, celibacy or continence in marriage, and responsibility for the poor or suffering in the community at large. By the third century, these became the particular obligations of men and women, known as the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant, who took vows of poverty, chastity and service to their bishop. An office distinctive to Syrian Christianity, the Members of the Covenant are found at the heart of civic church life well into the tenth century and later. Their work was not replaced by the rise of monasticism. The emphasis on these basic ideals allowed women as well as men to conduct visible and active forms of ministry.[19] The prominent roles of women characters in the *Acts of Thomas* offer some attestation, albeit idealised, for a historical counterpart in the broader social realm.

The *Acts of Thomas* further engage a number of themes central to other early Syrian texts. Healing, bodily health and bodily wholeness are especially important. More than a narrative motif in which 'physical' signifies 'spiritual' healing, as if metaphorically, these works indicate that for emergent Syrian Christianity the human body was an essential component of the human person as a religious entity. 'Healing of soul' was not opposed to 'healing of body'; rather, these were understood to be mutually inclusive actions. Here is the frame in which Thomas preached celibacy as requisite for salvation. These texts assume a cosmology in which mortality is not a natural human condition. The redeemed body promised and imaged by the resurrected Christ was a body healed of its mortality – healed of any illness or suffering, and healed, too, of the necessity of procreation.

The celibacy Thomas preaches is inextricable from the healing miracles he performs, and also from the ministry to the poor that he provides. These are significations meant to depict a redeemed life to come, when salvation will be brought to fullness in the final resurrected order: the sick will be well, the hungry fed, the blind will see and the lame walk, the sad will rejoice – and mortality, too, will be healed and restored to immortal incorruptibility. The *Acts of Thomas*, like the *Diatessaron*, present physical, bodily acts as markers of the salvation to come. The believer can and should anticipate that salvation by seeking to live, now, in that state. Celibacy could be the mark of what

18 Caner, *Wandering, begging monks*; Griffith, 'Asceticism'.
19 Ashbrook Harvey, 'Women's service'.

redemption will be, a rejection of the fallen order rather than of the physical body or physical world as evil. Such a sensibility is compatible with Bardaisan's insistence on the goodness of creation, on humanity in God's image, and on human choice as essential to salvation – the choice to live according to the divine will or according to the fallen order. Such a perspective will also underlie, again, much of the asceticism that characterises late antique Syrian Christianity.

Similarly, the sacramental emphasis of the *Acts of Thomas* resonates deeply with the *Odes of Solomon*, and earlier, the *Didache* and Ignatius' letters. The invocations, prayers, hymns and ritual actions of sealing by oil, baptism by immersion and shared eucharist of bread, or bread and water, or bread and 'cup', tie the *Acts* intricately into the ritual life of a larger worshipping community. Strongly Trinitarian, the ritual practices described are joined to narratives and imagery of healing. Hence, the ascetic elements of these *Acts* cannot be separated from this larger ecclesiastical and Trinitarian context.

Rival traditions

There is much in these earliest texts that anticipates coherently and emphatically the normative Christian themes that would prevail by the late fourth and early fifth centuries. At the same time, it is important to see the malleability of these themes. The same images and practices could be used within different religious and cosmological systems to uphold contrasting world-views. I have already noted the presence of Marcionite communities, strong enough to incite Bardaisan to attack at the turn of the third century, and Ephrem to fury in the 360s. Eusebius' note that Bardaisan may have supported the Valentinians at one point is not our only evidence for Valentinian popularity in Syria. Scholars have argued that the Valentinian *Gospel of Philip* may well be of Syrian origin, since a number of its passages rely on Syriac etymologies.[20] While these passages do not make a Syrian provenance essential, the text seems to have circulated broadly throughout the east. Its strong emphases on sacraments, Trinitarian depictions of God and bridal imagery all give the *Gospel of Philip* a sensibility consonant with other early Syrian literature. In the fourth century, the emperor Julian was outraged over a violent attack by Arians upon the Valentinians of Edessa.[21] Their presence was clearly not a passing one.

Scholars have sometimes argued that other works associated with the apostle Thomas – above all the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Book of Thomas the*

20 Layton, *Scriptures*, 325–53.
21 Julian, *Epistulae* 40.

contender – originated in Syria.[22] This claim has been made in part because of the importance of the Thomas figure for Syrian Christianity. Thomas was associated with the foundations of Christianity in Mesopotamia and India apart from the *Acts* themselves. Eusebius knew an independent tradition linking Thomas to the conversion of Edessa before he evangelised Parthian Persia (*HE* 1.3; 2.1; 3.1). Edessa proudly held the relic of Thomas' bones – attested both by Ephrem and by the western pilgrim Egeria, who saw them on her visit to the city in April 384.

Thus Syrian Christianity was multi-faceted, and similar themes were refracted in contrasting ways through communities of diverse orientations. Our evidence does not help to order this fragmented picture, since prior to the fourth century it is hard to locate any of the texts. Bardaisan was an individual teacher, not an ecclesiastical official. The *Didache*, the *Odes*, the *Acts of Thomas* and other gospels are texts we cannot identify within specific groups in specific places. The exception to this situation is also the case that makes the point most dramatically: for Syria, the emergence of Manichaeism sharply demonstrates the possibilities of shared imagery with divergent functions.

The prophet Mani was born in Persian Mesopotamia in 216, son of a father who had joined the Jewish Christian baptismal sect of the Elkesaites. As a boy he began to receive revelations from his 'divine twin', leading to bitter disputes with the members and elders of his sect. In 240, at age 24, Mani received his call to heavenly discipleship and began his career as religious founder. Sending out missionaries and himself travelling to India, Mani preached a religion with himself as the final, true prophet. The Persian court under Shapor I (242–73) apparently held him in high favour. But Shapor's successors saw matters differently. Mani died a martyr following imprisonment in 276.

Mani's religious teaching drew into its complex cosmology many of the religious systems already present in the east: Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism and Gnostic teachings. His devotees understood him to be the divine Paraclete promised by Christ in the gospel of John, thereby bringing God's revelation to its final completion. At the same time, Mani taught extensively from his own revelations, producing a huge corpus in Syriac of theological, liturgical and homiletic works. This literature, with Mani's apostles, travelled throughout the trade routes east and west, from the Silk Route to Europe, soon translated into Greek, Latin and Coptic, or, to the east, into Turkish and Chinese.[23]

22 Layton, *Scriptures*, 359–409.
23 Lieu, *Manichaeism*.

Fundamental to Mani's system was a notion of cosmic battle between good and evil, light and dark, present throughout the cosmos in 'particles'. Matter was not intrinsically evil, but it could be a prison in which light particles were trapped. The Manichaean mission was to free the light particles to return to their heavenly home. Within the elaborate mythological scheme Mani constructed, the human body had been created by demonic powers of the lower realm, a poor parody of the heavenly prototype of Adam/Eve, the androgynous humanity of divine origin. Because their spirits were of heavenly origin, humanity could liberate divine light particles from within, turning the body into a vehicle for salvation. Ritual practices as complex as this mythological scheme allowed Manichaeans to construct their daily lives so as to participate continuously in the process of transforming material reality from a realm dominated by dark particles into one not only liberating light particles, but further, serving as a harbinger or storehouse for gathering in divine forces of light.[24]

The central Manichaean ritual was that of a daily cultic meal and the elaborate practices necessary to arrange it. Two classes of adherents enabled such a ritual structure to operate: the Elect, or Adepts, whose sole task was the liberation of light particles; and the Hearers (Auditors) whose devotion was enacted through service to the Elect. As the Elect sought to live a life most suitable to liberating, or gathering in, the divine light, they had to have as little engagement in the fallen world as possible. This life of perfection was known as the Rest. Its practical expression was a life of celibacy and extreme renunciation, passed in wandering beggary. In turn, the Hearers undertook the necessarily ambiguous tasks of working in the world to obtain, prepare and distribute the food needed by the Elect. The Hearers made possible what the Elect did, and the Elect made possible the Hearers' future salvation.

Manichaean ritual life, however, was built on more than mythological narratives. It was also built on a scientific world-view that understood change to be possible: matter could be altered from prison to liberating vehicle. This was true of the cosmos; it was true of the body. The emphasis on ritual practices and especially on food was above all a focus on attaining health. Once again one finds repeated imagery of Christ as the Good Physician, healer of the wounded, who heals the collective body of the faithful even as he heals the individual bodies of the sick.

This medical imagery dominates the large corpus of Manichaean hymns that survive in Coptic, translated from Syriac originals of the third and early fourth

24 BeDuhn, *Manichaean body*.

centuries, known as the *Manichaean psalm book*.[25] Even devoid of their liturgical settings and music, these hymns are arresting in their powerful rhythms and beautiful images. Poignant prayers for healing are interlaced with lush evocations of a heavenly existence imaged in vivid sensory terms. Biblical images frame and present Mani's teachings. Additionally, borrowings from the *Acts of Thomas* are particularly striking. Indeed, the *Acts of Thomas* belong to a corpus of five apocryphal acts incorporated into the Manichaean canon. The description in the Manichaean *Psalms* of the Elect as wandering beggars is closely modelled on that of Thomas in the *Acts*. Once again, it was a clear prototype for subsequent Syrian ascetic traditions.

Thriving over vast geographical and cultural territories, Manichaeism can hardly be seen as a monolithic religion. Diversity in teachings and orientation characterise its history. Yet its popularity in Syria for some centuries cannot be lightly dismissed. Its basic themes and images draw deeply from those favoured across the varieties of earliest Syrian Christianity, reminding us that these same images could work effectively across a full spectrum of responses to bodily existence in a physical world: from renunciation as evil, to celebration as redemptive and redeemed. Just as a fundamental dualism underlay its system, so, too, did an embodied notion of healing pervade its presentation of salvation.

Achieved order, shared memory

Shortly before Mani's death, Antioch again flared into view with the notorious episcopacy of Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch from 260 until a special synod convened in 268 deposed him. Although subsequent generations granted him a notoriety reserved for a select few in the annals of the church, the historical evidence is difficult to reconstruct. As reported by Eusebius (*HE* 7.27–30), the bishops were scandalised as much and possibly more by Paul's behaviour than by his teachings. Their charges were cast in terms of standard invective: they opposed his allegedly dramatic preaching style, irregular liturgical practices, questionable relations with women and apparent interference with civic and provincial affairs. Nonetheless, their measures to discipline him were quite unusual. The Council of Antioch in 268 produced a synodal letter, preserved by Eusebius (*HE* 7.30), addressed nominally to the bishops Dionysius of Rome and Maximus of Alexandria and further 'to the entire catholic church throughout the world'. If local or provincial synods had become increasingly common over the course of the third century, the claim

25 *Manichaean psalm-book*, Allberry (ed.); Säve-Söderbergh, *Studies*.

to ecumenical authority was unprecedented. As such, it became a benchmark for later conciliar actions.

The synodal letter against Paul is the only contemporary account we have of Paul's situation, and it says little about his theology except that he taught a 'low' Christology: that Jesus Christ had been a mere man, and thus was not 'from above'. A number of later sources expand on this charge, but their accuracy is dubious, clouded as they are with the technical vocabulary and agendas of later theological disputes. Here one is given the impression that Paul distinguished between Word and Son, but it may be that Paul and his accusers were approaching Christology from different paradigms of how the human and divine elements of Jesus Christ were united in one person.[26]

In a flurry of further scandal, Paul refused to give up his church until the emperor Aurelian was drawn into the dispute and had him exiled. Despite the vindictive charges of later writers, there is no evidence that Paul was given any kind of special protection by queen Zenobia. Indeed, the so-called 'revolt' of Palmyra shortly after the emperor Aurelian's death in 272 is an event about which we know little, and which lends itself to various interpretations. But there is no basis for the idea of a separate 'Palmyrene' position which Paul might have represented, or which might have galvanised local populations against Roman rule. The immediate instability of the imperial throne appears to have been the salient issue.

Two developments of the fourth century bear upon the evidence here considered for the first three centuries. First is the appearance, essentially new, of martyrdom as a possibility for Christians of Syria and Mesopotamia. Apart from occasional (admittedly dramatic) incidents in Antioch,[27] and despite the account of the apostle's martyrdom in the *Acts of Thomas*, Christians in this region had little if any direct experience with persecution until the fourth century. The semi-autonomous political states of the Syriac-speaking territories under Roman domination lasted until well into the third century, a situation perhaps preventing the legal problems and fears that led to sporadic Roman persecutions of Christians elsewhere. In Persian territory, several martyrdoms occurred in the 270s – including the execution of Mani, but also of the Christian woman Candida. These seem to have happened only because of conversions within the royal family, offending the larger Zoroastrian frame of government.[28] But in the early fourth century, several Christians in the territory of

26 Behr, *Way to Nicaea*, 207–35.

27 Euseb. *HE* 6. 29, 34, 39 (Babylas). For Antioch's martyrs in the great persecution instigated by Diocletian, see further 8.12–13.

28 Brock, 'A martyr at the Sasanid court'.

Edessa were martyred during the final great persecution begun by Diocletian. The *Acts of the Edessan martyrs*, Shmona, Guria and the deacon Habib, though written later, present historically sound accounts of the events, which were notably less extreme than similar occurrences to the west.[29]

In 342, apparently in response to the changing religious loyalties of the Roman government, the Persians began to undertake sustained, widespread persecutions of Christians in their territories, accusing them of loyalty to the Christian Roman emperors.[30] In the early fifth century, the noble families of Edessa sought to re-establish their Christian past in terms more flattering to their self-image. Included in the effort was a second set of flagrantly anachronistic Edessan martyr texts, presenting the stories of Sharbil, Babai and Barsamya, members of the Edessan aristocracy, allegedly martyred in the year 105.[31] Thus, the body of Syriac martyr literature is relatively late in comparison with Greek and Latin works from the west. In this situation, the pervasive emphasis on ascetic practices and on the significance of bodily condition, characterising Syrian Christianity of all stripes from its very beginnings, cannot have been moulded by a culture of martyrdom and persecution.[32]

Secondly, by the turn of the fourth century, foundation legends begin to appear which, like the *Acts of Thomas*, purport to give accounts of apostolic missions establishing Christianity throughout greater Syria. Most famous was the legendary correspondence between Jesus and king Abgar Ukkama ('the Black') of Edessa.[33] The story is best known in the version of Eusebius (*HE* 1.13), in which the apostle Thaddaeus, one of the seventy, is sent by Thomas to convert the kingdom of Edessa. Eusebius claims to have translated this correspondence directly from Syriac into Greek (*HE* 1.13.6–10).[34]

An elaborated version of the legend appeared early in the fifth century in Syriac, known as the *Teaching of Addai*.[35] Here the correspondence is embedded in a detailed narrative in which the apostle Addai (identified with Eusebius' Thaddaeus) converts Abgar, his family and all the nobility of the region, establishing an ordered and well-governed church as Edessa becomes the first Christian 'state'.[36] By the sixth century, a further legend building from this found its

29 *Euphemia and the Goth with the Acts of martyrdom of the confessors of Edessa*, Burkitt (ed. and trans.); for redating, see Doran, 'Martyrdom of Habbib'.
30 Brock, 'Christians in the Sasanid empire'.
31 *Acts of Sharbil, Babai and Barsamya*, Cureton. (ed. and trans.)
32 Harvey, 'Edessan martyrs'; Griffith, 'Asceticism'.
33 *The Abgar legend*, *NTApoc*, vol. 1, 492–7 (introduction), 497–9 (translation).
34 Brock, 'Eusebius and Syriac Christianity'; Peppermüller, 'Griechische Papyrusfragmente'.
35 *Teaching of Addai*, Phillips (ed.), Howard (trans.)
36 Griffith, 'The *Doctrina Addai* as a paradigm'.

literary form as the *Acts of Mar Mari*. These purport to recount Addai's commission of the apostle Mari to convert Mesopotamia ('Babylon'),[37] a mission conducted through successes among royal families and aristocrats, and conversions invariably provoked by healing miracles. Unlike the *Acts of Thomas* but like the account of Addai, the *Acts of Mari* have no interest in martyrdom, and give no hint of any kind of social disruption or chaos due to the introduction of Christianity.

How do these later conversion narratives bear upon our early evidence? There is certainly no connection through historical events. The Abgar legend became greatly loved throughout the Christian world, but no trace of its story nor its events can be found earlier than Eusebius' account. However, certain threads of thematic continuity tie the later legends of Addai and Mari to the early Syrian texts. One is interest in royal favour – a theme shared with the *Acts of Thomas*, and a situation known to Bardaisan and Mani. Another is the crucial role of travel along the trade routes, again a feature of the *Acts of Thomas*, of Mani's missions, and a necessary background for Bardaisan's ethnographic interests. Most important, however, is the constant stress on healing: on Jesus as the Good Physician, on belief as a state that yields bodily health, and on the high valuation thus given to the body and its condition in the context of Christian devotion.

37 *Actes de Mar Mari*, Jullien and Jullien (eds. and trans.); *The Acts of Mar Mari the Apostle*, A. Harrak (ed. and trans.), Writings from the Greco-Roman World II (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005).

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The spread of Christianity (1st – 4th cents. CE)
Christian communities of the:
1st cent.
2nd cent.
1st and 2nd cents.
Until 325
High concentration of Christian communities before 325
Centres of persecutions (with date)
Patriarchate
Archbishopric
Bishopric (selection)
NIKAIA Location of ecumenical councils up to the 4th cent.
Roma General synods up to the 4th cent.
Locations of ecumenical councils and general synods up to the 4th cent.

Map 4. The spread of Christianity (1st–4th centuries CE)

Figure 6. Reconstruction of Christian baptistery, Dura Europos (photo: Yale University Art Gallery, Dura-Europos Collection)